

SCOTTISH CALVINISM AND FOREIGN MISSIONS

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THE Reformers, and Calvin in particular, have often been unjustly criticised as lacking in zeal for Foreign Missions. Any criticism of such a kind should recognize important facts. Among these is the fact that before the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the sea power of the world was in the hands of those who opposed the Gospel as preached by the Reformers. In illustration we have only to point to the disastrous ending of the evangelical colony which Admiral Coligny sent to Brazil. Calvin did everything in his power for it. More important, perhaps, is the emphasis which Calvin lays on the need of missionary zeal in many of his writings. "We should desire," he says, "to make it at least the subject of our prayers every day that God may gather churches to Himself from all quarters of the world."¹ Commenting on Isa. xii. 4, he says that "He means that the work of this deliverance will be so excellent, that it ought to be proclaimed not in one corner only, but throughout the whole world." On Micah iv. 3, he says: "The Lord will show, not only in one corner, what true religion is, and how He seeks to be worshipped, but He will send forth His voice to the extreme limits of the earth." In his prayers attached to his lectures on Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the minor Prophets, he repeatedly expressed the same longing for the evangelization of the whole world. His prayer, following a lecture on Malachi i, concludes with this outburst of pious yearning: "that undoubtedly Thy name shall be magnified and celebrated throughout the whole world."

The unmistakable witness of Calvin's writings leads inevitably from the fundamental conception of divine sovereignty to the obligation of all Christian believers to make the Gospel known to all peoples of the earth. It was a quickened consciousness of obligation and responsibility to God and their fellowmen everywhere, which pervades the whole of the Reformed system of doctrine, that gave birth in Scotland to its now world-wide missionary enterprise.

¹ *Institutes*, Bk III, xx, 41, 42.

II

The Reformation was itself a missionary movement on a grand international scale. For more than a century it had to fight for its life. In Scotland this was particularly the case. While Scotland, during that tragic but heroic century, had to struggle for the maintenance of the Reformed faith at home in impoverished circumstances, it nevertheless sought to follow its expatriated people, as prisoners or colonists, to distant lands with the means of grace ministered by chaplains.¹ In the first and second fleets that proceeded from Scotland to colonize the Isthmus of Panama there were altogether seven ministers. The Scottish armies that fought in the wars of Protestantism in Europe had also their accredited chaplains. So rich in spiritual fruit were the revivals in Sutherlandshire that the famous regiment named after that county had many of its officers and men, so qualified for the conduct of religious services that in the war in Cape Colony towards the end of the 18th century their commanding officer relieved the authorities of the obligation of appointing regular chaplains to it. Such chaplains and lay speakers may surely be regarded as making their own contributions to the history of Foreign Missions.

But the first organized effort in Scotland to send the Gospel to peoples overseas we owe to the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge. Our S.P.C.K. was inaugurated by an Episcopalian minister, James Kirkwood, who, in 1702, was appointed corresponding member in Scotland of the English S.P.C.K. Kirkwood in polity and doctrine represented the Leighton tradition. While acting as Chaplain to Breadalbane he became familiar with the religious needs of the Highlands. So impressed was he with this need that he at once set about getting, and succeeded in enlisting, the sympathy of Professor George Meldrum, Edinburgh, Bishop Burnet, Lord Cullen, Robert Baillie, and other influential persons in forming the Society.² It says much for the catholicity and superb denominational confidence of Reformed Scotland that while it was still bathing wounds inflicted in a warfare of politics it heartily agreed to the transplantation of an English Society whose most influential directors were English Episcopalians. The beginnings of the Society in Scotland were modest, but the assiduous Kirkwood realized that to meet the clamant needs, the Society, if its efforts were to be successful, would have to be incorporated under royal authority and patronage, and its finance put on a sound and wide basis. With this aim in view he secured

¹ Cf. Dr. Weir's *Foreign Missions of the Church of Scotland*, p. 72.

² See my *Highland Libraries in the Eighteenth Century* in the *Records of the Glasgow Bibliographical Society*, vii, 36 ff.

the help of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the other influential officers of the Society in London. Following upon his efforts in 1708, and indeed as a result of these, Letters Patent were granted by Queen Anne, on 25th May, 1709, erecting the Society into a body corporate which was to use its resources for "instructing the people in the Christian Reformed Protestant Religion." The Society and its governors were thus obliged, and by their own request, to continue in Scotland the clear stream of Reformed tradition which issued from its fountain-head at Geneva.

Although for twenty years it confined its efforts to what might be regarded as Home Mission work, there was a clause of its constitution which ran: "to extend their endeavours for the advancement of the Christian religion to heathen nations, and for that end to give encouragement to ministers to preach the Gospel among them."

In 1732 the appeal of their original constitution moved the directors to take the first steps "to have the full light of the Gospel shine everywhere, and its teaching communicated to all who still sit in darkness." It was a memorable decision, which was particularly relevant to the concurrent religious revival. The rising sun of Scottish Foreign Missions then shot its first quivering rays of light across the seas. Forthwith the Society organized boards of correspondents to dispense its funds at Boston, New York and Massachusetts Bay. On the roll of its American Missionaries stand the names of Azariah Horton, who laboured among the Delaware Indians; Joseph Secomb, who was stationed among the Pendbscot Indians; Ebenezer Hinsdale at Fort Dummer on Connecticut River, and Stephen Parker at Port Richmond. These had their "assistants and interpreters." The great and greatly beloved David Brainerd, the inspirer of many missionaries, whose *Diary* has become a religious classic and one of the chief ornaments of Reformed missionary literature, laboured and died in the Society's service. He was succeeded by his brother John. Martin, Richardson, Decum and Kirkland also worked successfully for the Society. Besides these, the Society sent two missionaries and an interpreter to the Delaware Indians, and paid towards the support of two missionaries in Canada. It had also a missionary school at Connecticut. It further contributed to the expense of educating for mission work in their native Africa "two negro men named Bristol Zamma and John Quammine," and signified its eagerness to "contribute to the intended Mission in Africa whenever the same shall, by the blessing of God, take effect."¹

Further, there is the equally interesting fact that the Society sent John Macleod, a native of Skye, to Georgia in 1735 to the Highlanders from the braes of Inverness and elsewhere, who had been brought there

¹ MS *Report*, 1713-37, C. of S. L.E.

by the Trustees of the Georgia Estates in 1730, and who were desirous that they should have a Presbyterian minister to preach to them in Gaelic. Macleod remained in Georgia till 1740, when the greater part of the colonists were cut off in the unsuccessful expedition against the Spaniards at St. Augustine.¹

This great Society formed a rallying ground for the earnest evangelicals of the Church who wished to share in Scotland's first effort at world evangelisation. Other missionary Societies were springing up throughout the country. In 1792 the Baptist Missionary Society was formed in London, and the London Missionary Society came into being in 1795. In February, 1796, the Scottish Missionary Society was formed in Edinburgh, and in Glasgow, the Glasgow Missionary Society. Dr. John Erskine was the enthusiastic projector of the Edinburgh Society. These societies drew their membership and contributions mostly from the Church of Scotland. For the General Synod of the Secession Church, while "approving of the great design of missionary societies for sending the gospel to the heathen . . . judge that neither their own members, nor the people under their inspection can, in consistency with their distinguishing profession as Seceders, and without danger of falling from it, publicly co-operate with these societies in their present state."² This was carried against the protests of several ministers.³

But what was the Church of Scotland doing to redeem its pledges to its sovereign Lord? It is true that in 1762 the General Assembly ordered a collection to be made in behalf of the Missions to the Indians, and the sum of £543 5s. 3d. was realized. This was the first and only Assembly collection for Missions that was raised by the Church during the 18th century.⁴ But soon the Church was to be challenged in her Assembly to state unequivocally whether or not she was willing to discharge in full the obligations of her divine commission.

III

The General Assembly of 1796 stands out the most memorable of many memorable Assemblies of the eighteenth century for the very famous debate which took place on the 27th day of May of that year on "the propagation of the Gospel among the heathen." That debate Hugh Miller describes as "the most extraordinary perhaps, and the richest in character

¹ *Ibid.* and S.P.C.K. *Account*.

² McKerrow, p. 384.

³ Several Associate congregations and two Secession congregations contributed to the Edinburgh Society, in 1796.

⁴ Cf. Weir, p. 10

that ever originated in the Courts of a Protestant Church.”¹ Heron’s very rare report² of that Assembly furnished Hugh Miller with abundant material for one of the most striking of the numerous polemics of that remarkable man of genius. But a fair appraisal of the debate requires of us a careful and sympathetic consideration of serious movements in the intellectual, political and religious life of Scotland at that time to which the debaters reacted.

It was a time of great intellectual ferment. The French Revolution had burst with consequent wild horrors, and a whole nation accepted the tenets of atheism for its religious and moral code. The gilded pinnacles of society were thrown to pieces by this new political radicalism which looked with derision at all sacred institutions. Radical societies were formed all over the country which were in touch with French Jacobins. There were not a few in the Church whose emasculated belief was insufficient to resist the fear of the total disappearance of the Christian religion,³ and who accordingly imagined that every kind of society was a hatching place of revolutions. The missionary societies, which were the promoters of Foreign Mission enterprise, did not escape this distressful suspicion. On the other hand since 1790 there was a remarkable quickening of religious life in Scotland with a corresponding confident re-assertion of traditional Reformed belief. To ask the Assembly, at such a period in world history, to identify the Church with an enterprise promoted by Societies even unjustly suspected, and go to the ends of the earth with a religion that was apparently collapsing elsewhere, and might, according to some, collapse in Scotland, was a severe test to determine whether faith or fear prevailed in the Church of Christ in Scotland. The Assembly itself was charged with suspicion and dread, and parties were divided sharply in their beliefs and attitudes to the purposes, power, and universality of the Gospel. The question of Foreign Missions was brought

¹ Hugh Miller, *Church of Scotland, Missionary and anti-Missionary*, p. 3.

² *Account of the Proceedings and Debate, in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland*, 27th May, 1796.

³ Cf. Footnote. “Here, then, are the two great pillars which support our religion, the power and the faithfulness of God; and, thus supported, it is impossible that it can be undermined by art, or overthrown by violence. Persuaded that, with such security, it must be perpetual, how must we pity those deluded and vain-glorious men, who, over-rating their own abilities, fancy that Christianity is ready to perish, and by *their* means; who tell us that, in the close of the eighteenth century, the ‘Age of Reason’ has arrived, and that of superstition drawn towards its close; and who boast that by the rapid progress of the human mind in knowledge, Christianity must retire, and give place to the idol of their worship, a new and improved philosophy.”—*A Sermon preached before the Edinburgh Missionary Society, Nov. 10, 1796*. By James Peddie, Minister of the Associate Congregation in Bristo Street, Edinburgh, p. 18.

before them in two overtures which expressed the quickened interest of an awakened people. The first was from the Synod of Fife, and it asked "that the Assembly may consider of the most effectual methods by which the Church of Scotland may contribute to the diffusion of the Gospel over the world."¹

The second overture was from the Synod of Moray. It was more specific. It is a historic document of such importance as deserves its repetition here. It ran: "It is humbly overtured to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland that in respect a very laudable zeal for sending the Gospel to Heathen Countries hath appeared both in Scotland and England, the Assembly should encourage this spirit and promote this most important and desirable object, by appointing a general collection over the church, or adopting whatever other method may appear to them most effectual."² The overture was in the name of William McBean, and Lachlan McPherson, Synod Clk, certified that this overture was unanimously passed at the meeting of the Synod held at Forres on April 26, 1796, and that all members of the Synod were recommended to use their influence in its support.

The debate opened with one of those disingenuous stratagems in procedure, unfortunately too common in the debates in all Assemblies, which aimed in the gentlest terms at defeating the purpose of the overtures, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of both, an importance, it was averred, that would be enhanced by treating the two conjointly. For if the Fife overture had been discussed by itself and approved the Assembly would be bound to accede to the request of the overture from Moray which was the crucial point in the discussion of the day. The ecclesiastics saw the situation clearly, and under the leadership of Principal Hill, the Assembly agreed to take the two overtures together. This virtually decided their fate, but with an issue entirely different from the intention of those that secured their defeat. After the question of procedure was settled, William McBean, the originator and promoter of the overture that was to test the Assembly, rose up in its support. There he stood, a handsome and good-looking man with the glow of his thirty-seventh summer on his cheek. He was then minister of Alves, to which he was translated in 1792 from the Parish of Moy in Inverness-shire. Brought up in the undiluted evangelism of the saintly James Calder of Croy, he was early taught by precept and example the saving power of the Gospel. In Moy he taught and practised as he was instructed himself. With an overpowering conviction of the potency and sufficiency of the Gospel for all the children of men he cast his pebble into the placid sea of apparent indifference to the heathen's need of that Gospel, and in doing so earned

the enviable honour of creating ripples on that sea which have since, by the blowing of the Spirit of God, mounted into mighty waves of blessing that have lapped every shore of the heathen world.

His speech was modest, simple, direct and scriptural. And because of its detachment from the zone of the academic and philosophical, it shows to-day greater freshness than the learned and pretentious disquisitions of others who took part in the debate. Here is part of the speech: "Moderator, I hope, I need not offer any argument to convince the venerable Assembly of the high importance of the object which this overture presents to our consideration ; namely, the most effectual means of propagating the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ. We, in this island, have long enjoyed a knowledge of its doctrines, and a participation of its blessings. We should therefore desire, in the spirit of this holy religion, that all other men may share in its benefits and privileges. But alas ! how great a portion of the earth is still the region of darkness ; how many of our fellow creatures have enjoyed no opportunity of embracing the Gospel ? While, therefore, it becomes all true Christians to wish for, and promote its diffusion, it is surely particularly incumbent on those who minister in holy things, and who, every Lord's day in public, offer up their fervent prayers, and those of their congregation, for the speedy and universal diffusion of the Gospel ; it is, I say, particularly incumbent on them to prove their sincerity, by shewing an example of active zeal, in bringing about this happy event. Actuated by such sentiments, the Synod of Moray, to which I have the honour to belong, has sent up one of the two overtures on your table, and I trust the proposal it contains will obtain the sanction of the Assembly. Scripture prophecy points our faith to the accomplishment of this promised event, and while we anticipate, it ought also to be our endeavour to hasten the time, when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth, 'as the waters cover the sea.' "1

After a few speeches of a sympathetic nature, George Hamilton, minister of Gladsmuir, moved dismissal of the overtures. His speech, which was learned and polished, reached the highest pitch of his eloquence, when he exclaimed : "To spread abroad the knowledge of the Gospel among barbarous and heathen nations seems to me highly preposterous." Here there was a dramatic interlude. Dr. John Erskine, with conscience in revolt against a culture that attenuated Christianity, rose, and stretching his hand toward the bookboard before the Moderator, uttered the memorable sentence : "Rax me that Bible." This saying, like others that sprang from the depths of emotion and conviction, was destined to live for ever, even though its authenticity rests on a strong tradition

and not on documentary evidence. Dr. Carlyle of Inveresk followed with a brief but characteristic speech of the quality familiar to students of his autobiography.

Principal Hill, the leader of the Assembly, followed with a speech entirely different in religious sentiment from that of Hamilton and Carlyle. Nevertheless, this deservedly famous teacher of dogmatic truth sullied alike his honour and his prestige by a laboured attempt to identify the missionary societies with the revolutionary societies of the country. To the simple motion of dismissal by Hamilton he added a long rider to use every competent means of promoting the gospel, "and resolve that they will embrace with zeal and thankfulness any future opportunity of contributing by their exertions to the propagation of the Gospel of Christ, which Divine Providence may hereafter open." The vote was taken. The numbers on the division were : Appoint, 44 ; Dismiss, 58 ; majority for Principal Hill's motion, 14.¹ The division was on party lines, although not strictly so.

There can be no doubt, but Principal Hill's appeal to fear of French atheism carried a few to his side. One, at least, whose sympathies were entirely with McBean's motion, was the latter's successor at Moy, Hugh Mackay, a perfervid evangelical, a pious and zealous pastor, an eminently attractive preacher, and later a member of the northern Missionary Society.² Yet he stood up in the Assembly, after Principal Hill had spoken, and openly declared himself for dismissal of the overture. It is conceivable that his alarm at the rise of radical groups who discussed Paine's famous manifesto, translated into Gaelic, in northern seaports from Stornoway to Cromarty³ and in most of the market places of the north, was intensified by Hill's weighty warnings. There were other earnest men who, no doubt, sought refuge from a similar alarm in the ranks of the majority.

But the fact remains that the motion that became the finding of the Assembly had no finality in it. It was guardedly sympathetic. Indeed, Foreign Mission work could not now be left alone. The Church was under obligation to take it up at some future date, so that the great debate stirred up enthusiasm within the Church, and instead of crushing the enterprize of the Societies, as Hamilton, Carlyle and their followers desired, the debate served to give them publicity and much stimulus. New branches sprang up all over the country.⁴ What is even more

¹ See Heron's *Account*.

² In his own parish of Moy, in 1796, £105 9s. were collected for the Northern Missionary Society. See *Report* and Barron's *Highlands*, p. 2.

³ See my *Literature of the Scottish Gael*, p. 36.

⁴ See *Abstract of Proceedings and State of the Funds of the Edinburgh Missionary Society*, 1797.

impressive is the fact that in a few years McBean's defeated motion was taken in spirit, if not in letter, by some of those who voted previously for its defeat, to an Assembly that unhesitatingly adopted what it previously rejected. Thus was laid the foundation of the present day achievements in the Foreign field of the Church of Scotland and her daughter Churches throughout the world. The honours in this initiative belong to a Highland minister of a Highland Synod whose name is quite unknown among the vast number of highly privileged men and women who throughout the Reformed Church direct the world-wide enterprize which he so earnestly pleaded that the Church which he loved should undertake for his Lord and Saviour.

IV

When the Assembly in that eventful day in May, 1796, voted even as it did, it registered an irrevocable decision, without parallel among the Reformed¹ Churches of Europe, to identify the Church with its full divine Commission. The decision was, however, in line with the aspirations of all those who continued in the stream of the historic Reformed witness. Those who did so, whether at meetings of Societies or of Assemblies, or in their own pulpits, grasped the fact that Paul's declarations of profound mysteries in his Epistle to the Romans were not the cold intellectual conclusions of an exclusive dogmatist, but flames from the soul of a Christian missionary consumed with zeal for the salvation of men, irrespective of whether they were cultured or barbarous, Jews or Gentiles. Accordingly, they sought to follow this great exemplar, without fear or imprudent questioning, in endeavouring to make known the Gospel, which contained these high but congruous doctrines, to the heathen world believed by them to be as much in need of the whole counsel of God as themselves. The current of Reformed faith which flowed down from the Reformation carried in it a firm belief in Christ's representation of His own significance for the world as its only Saviour, and consequently the Saviour for all. Alongside of that there was a conscious filial relationship involving grateful obedience of believers to God the Father who as Sovereign Lord ruled by His omnipotence. Corresponding with the flow and ebb of this stream there was a strengthening or weakening of the pulse of religious life, a stiffening or relaxing of moral restraint and self-discipline and a quickening or impairing of the national resolve. It was the flow of this stream that originated the missionary societies, that constrained the Assembly to acknowledge the Church's divine obligations and fortified the nation against a threatened revolution. These are lessons from Scotland's past which it would be to the advantage of Scotland of to-day to learn.

¹ The *Moravians* are not included as in polity they are more closely connected with the Lutherans.